

# Music, Dance and the Performing Arts

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Do you turn on the radio as soon as you come home from school? Do you find it hard to sit still when a really good tune is playing? Music and dance are among the great joys of life. Several types of music that we think of simply as “American” actually owe their existence to African-Americans. We can also thank African-Americans for some favorite dances. In this chapter you will learn how this music and dance developed. You will also meet a number of South Carolinians who became famous musicians, singers, dancers, and performers.

## Music

Because of a different cultural background and segregation, African-Americans developed their own distinctive music. This included the blues, ragtime, and gospel music. The blues and ragtime, in turn, helped create jazz. African-American music also influenced white composers. Whites sometimes used black material in their compositions.

Ragtime is associated with entertainment, especially piano music. This was the first African-American music to become popular all across the U.S. It is a style of music that is called “syncopated,” where the beat that is usually weak is accented. On the piano the right hand plays the melody while the left hand plays rhythms in a pattern. Drifters traveling from town to town in the late 1800s were the first to play ragtime. Although ragtime’s roots are probably European, an African-American, Scott Joplin of Texas, popularized it.

The music called the blues became popular in the early 1900s. It reflected the uncertain life of African-Americans in the years after the Civil War. They were no longer enslaved. However, they were not equal in American society. Blues emerged from

spirituals and work songs. Many of the songs included bits and pieces of the white songs that African-Americans heard in their daily lives. As African-Americans began to work off the farm, the songs began to focus on their new jobs. One very popular song was “John Henry.” It was about an African-American railroad worker who was very strong and very proud. He was killed proving the steam hammer could not replace him. Blues generally focused on the sad things in people’s lives like racial woes, lost love, sickness, and poverty. People enjoyed this because sharing sorrow often made them feel better.

The blues became popular at any event where people gathered. One person sang and accompanied the music with a guitar or banjo. Singers and workers traveling around to make a living spread the blues all over the South. In the cities, the blues became more sophisticated. Groups that were similar to small jazz bands began to accompany the singers. More women began to perform. Love songs became popular as well. However, no one recorded the blues until 1920.

Many African-American bands formed in the years after the Civil War. Some developed out of the Confederate marching bands. With the soldiers gone home, many cheap instruments were readily available. African-Americans could afford to buy them. Two types of bands were string bands and brass bands. String bands played at dances and brass bands played at parades, celebrations, and funerals. Many of the early musicians could not read, so they “improvised.” Improvise means making up the music yourself. They experimented as they played to see what sounded good. By the 1890s, jazz was beginning to develop.



*The world famous Jenkins Orphanage Band in a photo taken around 1900. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., *The History of S.C. Slide Collection*, slide G-33 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of S.C. State Museum.*

## The Jenkins Orphanage Band

The story of the Jenkins Orphanage Band, the first black instrumental group organized in South Carolina, almost sounds like a fairy tale. Theirs is a story of triumph over adversity. Out of the need to find a way to feed and clothe hungry children came a one-of-a-kind musical miracle. Many fine musicians who later made musical careers began their training with the Jenkins Orphanage Band. Among them were William “Cat” Anderson, “Peanuts” Holland, and Jabbo Smith. Bands from the Jenkins Orphanage played all over the U.S. and Europe for half a century until the 1950s. The original cast of the musical *Porgy*, by DuBose Heyward, included a cast from the Jenkins Orphanage when it was staged in New York in 1927. The bands made three trips to Europe. They even played before royalty.

How did it all begin? In the late 1800s, no government services existed to help the poor. On a cold winter morning in Charleston, the Reverend Daniel

Jenkins found four young African-American children alone and shivering. He decided to adopt them when he learned that they were orphans. He realized that many other children needed help. To raise money, Rev. Jenkins formed the Orphan Aid Society in 1892. Soon he found a building to house the many boys and girls. Located near the city jail, it was less than perfect. However, it provided security for the children. The Jenkins Orphanage was the only one for African-Americans in South Carolina.

Within four years, there were over 500 children living there. The Orphanage depended on public donations to survive, but this was not enough. The Rev. Jenkins came up with an idea to pay for expenses. He asked for contributions of musical instruments. Then he hired musicians to teach some of the boys how to play. The band played in the streets of Charleston. Rev. Jenkins used the attention they got to appeal for money.

The Orphanage never had a lot of money. They

scraped by for the first few years until a storm destroyed the Orphanage building in 1895. Rev. Jenkins decided to take some of the boys on tour in the North as a way to earn money to rebuild. However, they were unable to make enough money to pay the rebuilding costs.

Friends suggested a tour of England. Once the decision to go had been made, everything seemed to go wrong. The trip across the Atlantic was a disaster. The passengers on the ship were seasick. In England, the band's appearance caused such a stir that they were not allowed to perform. Rev. Jenkins was arrested. In court, the judge told him that children under the age of eleven were not allowed to perform in the streets for money. The band had so little money left that they could not even pay for the trip home.

Rev. Jenkins decided to appeal for money at a church. People responded wholeheartedly. Soon the group was able to return to Charleston. With all the publicity, the band became well-known to local people. Groups of children began to follow the band when it played. Many of them who were not orphans even wanted to enter the Orphanage just so they could play in the band!

Two years after the trip to England, the city of Charleston decided to grant the Orphanage \$200 a year. Some wealthy white citizens also made donations. Unfortunately, this was not enough to support the Orphanage.

So once again, Rev. Jenkins took his band on the road. This time they went to Florida. They hoped that the tourists visiting the state would make donations. Because the trip was very successful, they began to travel to other states. They played at several major expositions and fairs. In the early 1900s, they returned to England again. Over the years, they toured widely. By the early 1920s, they had five bands, a vocal group, and two girls' choirs.

Rev. Jenkins had a dream. He wanted to have a farm with plenty of space for the children and where the Orphanage could raise its own food. The youngsters could learn trades that would let them earn a living as adults. Eventually this dream came true. A 100-acre farm in Ladson, S.C. was donated. Industrial teachers taught carpentry, shoemaking, dressmaking, and other trades. Although not everyone

could expect to become a professional musician, they could be self sufficient. In addition to the orphans, many youths convicted of minor crimes lived there learning skills so they could make a living.

Over the years, the band had to face and overcome many problems. Traveling at home was often quite risky for the Jenkins Orphanage Band. Once a group of whites threatened them. The band had no weapons, but they were able to fool the hoodlums by pretending. They had wooden model guns that they used in practice. They stuck them out the windows and frightened off the hoodlums.

Sometimes, problems arose that no one could have foreseen. A trip in 1914 barely escaped disaster. The band had just begun a ten-week tour of England when World War I broke out. Everything came to a halt. The band was stranded in England for a month before they were able to get passage on a ship. Rev. Jenkins helped several stranded fellow travelers return home as well. He lent them money for the trip.

In the 1930s, the Depression brought other problems. The Orphanage found itself short of money as audiences and contributions dropped. In 1933, a fire damaged the building. In spite of all these problems, somehow they survived.

Rev. Jenkins died in 1937 after a lifetime of helping children. By the 1940s and 1950s, society was changing. These changes also affected the Jenkins Orphanage. People were better off. The Jenkins Orphanage did not admit as many children. With fewer musicians, the band allowed girls to join. By the 1970s, children of all races were entering the Orphanage. Even so, numbers still declined. As the 1980s began, the Jenkins Orphanage Band was only a memory.

## **James Reese Europe's 15th Regimental Band in World War I**

Not all the South Carolinians who served in World War I were soldiers. Some were musicians. Many of these were part of James Reese Europe's band.

James Reese Europe was a talented musician and band leader. He had toured widely in the years before World War I. In 1916, he joined the 15th Infantry of the National Guard, an African-American regi-



*A traveling band of jazz musicians before World War I. Courtesy William Loren Katz, Library of Congress.*

ment. They made him an officer. As part of the effort to encourage people to enlist, the commanding officer persuaded Europe to form a brass band. He managed to persuade over forty musicians to join by 1917. Like many other Americans, many of the members of the Jenkins Orphanage Band wanted to serve their country in World War I. The bandmaster and three musicians were “graduates” of the Jenkins Orphanage Band. At their first show, they played the carefully rehearsed orchestral music. Then, as the floor was cleared to get ready for dancing, they began to play dance music. These were jazz pieces that had barely been rehearsed. The atmosphere was electric. Both the audience and the musicians loved it. Europe’s blues arrangements were particularly popular.

In 1918, the Army sent the band to France where they entertained the soldiers. They performed in over twenty-five cities in France alone. They played for civilians as well as Allied troops. Assigned to combat as part of the 369th U.S. Infantry, they fought for four months at the front. Their unit was nicknamed the

“Hellfighters.” Near the end of the war, they went to Paris to perform. They returned home in 1919 as heroes. The band began a worldwide tour. Europe obtained a record contract. His future seemed assured.

Sadly, James Reese Europe’s career was brought to an untimely end after his return to the states. He had been having an ongoing quarrel with a drummer in the band, one of the Jenkins Orphanage Band alumni. Europe had objected to the young man’s behavior during performances. After a performance, the young man stabbed Europe in the throat. Europe died and the drummer was sent to prison.

## **Jazz**

No one is quite sure just where and how jazz music began, but it became well-known around 1900 in New Orleans and elsewhere. Both European and African music probably influenced it. Not much is known about the young African-Americans of the early 1900s who developed jazz. The jazz musicians generally were not allowed in the concert halls. The audience was mainly African-American in the early years. Many



jazz musicians performed in churches, dance halls, and in minstrel shows. Often their music was not written down. Certainly it was not recorded.

Regardless of its origin, this was something different. In the 1920s, many people looked on this “new” form of music with suspicion because it was so different. It seemed to have much less formal structure than other music of the day. Jazz has always relied greatly on “improvisation.” This means that musicians make up parts of the music as they play. A great deal of talent is required to do this. The music is exciting and unpredictable, though today we know that jazz has its own structure. Regardless, jazz adds up to wonderful entertainment.

Many native and adopted South Carolinians became well known in the world of jazz. Perhaps so many became successful because this was one of the few fields open to creative people regardless of race. Space allows us to meet just a few. All we can do in a book is tell you about them. If you really want to meet them, you need to listen to their music. If you have not already, perhaps one day you will.

John Barks “Dizzy” Gillespie is certainly South

Carolina’s best-known jazz musician. He was not only a composer and a trumpeter, but was an innovator who helped establish jazz in the 1930s and 1940s. Along with Charlie Parker, he developed a kind of jazz called “bebop.” This was the beginning of “modern” jazz. He also incorporated Latin music into this jazz form.

Dizzy Gillespie was born in Cheraw in 1917. His father liked to play music. He saw that Dizzy learned to play the piano. However, Dizzy discovered the trumpet after a friend received one. He formed his first band when he was just ten years old. North Carolina’s Laurinburg Institute gave him a music scholarship in 1932. He headed North to Philadelphia and then to New York. In 1937, he began to play with Swing Bands, including those of Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, and Duke Ellington. Later he formed his own band. His better known works include “A Night in Tunisia,” “My Melancholy Baby,” and “Leap Frog.” President Jimmy Carter sang along with Gillespie’s song “Salt Peanuts” at Carter’s inaugural celebration in 1976.

Bebop and Dizzy Gillespie go together like peanut butter and jelly. Bebop was a form of music that broke up the harmony and rhythm structure of the



*Born in Cheraw, “Dizzy” Gillespie became one of the world’s most famous jazz musicians, even inventing a new style of playing called “bebop.” Here he is entertaining the General Assembly just before they honored him in a resolution in 1976. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., *The History of S.C. Slide Collection*, slide C63 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Photo by Vic Tutte. Courtesy of The State newspaper.*

music. Its emphasis was on improvisation and a fast tempo. Often bebop, or hop, singers used nonsensical language, such as "Hey Bobba, Rebob." Bop musicians had a distinctive appearance. They wore dark glasses and berets. They grew short beards.

In 1942, Dizzy was playing some variations on chords during a break in a performance. Those chords became the basis for bebop. At first, the critics disliked this new music. It was not at all like the kind of music the Big Bands had played in the Swing era. By 1947, when Dizzy and fellow musician Charlie Parker played a bebop concert in Carnegie Hall, critics and the public loved it. Bebop has even influenced the kind of music heard in television commercials today.

Dizzy Gillespie was known for his style as a performer as well. He liked to experiment with chords and change the harmony. He seemed to enjoy performing for an audience, and audiences liked him.

Most trumpet teachers would probably not use Dizzy Gillespie as a model for their students. Once someone stepped on his trumpet, bending the bell. He played it and thought that the bend made it easier to hear himself. So along with his puffed-out cheeks, this odd-shaped instrument became his trademark. Gillespie died in his sleep in 1993 as one of his recordings played in the background.

James Alonzo "Cat" Anderson was known as an extremely versatile musician. He was a good trumpet player who could play all kinds of music. Louis Armstrong was his inspiration. A native of Greenville, Cat was born in 1916 and was orphaned at the age of four. He went to live at the Jenkins Orphanage. There he learned to play a musical instrument and began playing with their band at the age of seven. With several other boys, he formed an orchestra that played at local dances. Leaving the Orphanage, he toured with a group named the Carolina Cotton Pickers from 1932 to 1937. In the 1930s and 1940s, he played with several of the Big Bands. He made a name for himself with Duke Ellington's band, playing with it off and on from the 1940s to the 1960s. From 1947 to 1950, he had his own band. In 1971 he settled in California. For the next ten years, he was involved with the television and movie industry as well as touring. He also toured with the "Ice-Capades" from 1974 to 1975. Of the many songs he recorded, his best known songs

are "Swinging the Cat," "El Gato," and "Bluejean Beguine." Above all, he is remembered for his ability to hit the very high notes. He died in 1981.

Freddie Green, born in 1911, started his musical career at age twelve by learning to play the banjo. Today, he is known for giving the rhythm guitar a major role in the jazz orchestra. He liked to hold his guitar at an odd angle. "Tilted flat" is how it was described. He struck the strings in such a way as to produce a deeper, fuller sound. Listeners found it very distinctive. He also composed music including the jazz classic "Corner Pockets (Until I Met You)." Mostly self-taught, he began to play with a group called the Night Hawks. His first experience in traveling outside of the South was with the Jenkins Orphanage Band, although he did not live at the Orphanage. At the age of nineteen, he came to New York. He worked as an upholsterer during the day and played music in the evenings. He started to play the guitar and to find gigs at clubs. In 1937 at the age of twenty-six, he began a career as a guitarist with the Count Basie Orchestra. There he remained until 1987, when he died after a show.

Cladys "Jabbo" Smith was another "graduate" of the Jenkins Orphanage Band. He was born in Georgia in 1900. His mother placed him in the Orphanage at the age of six. He started touring with the band when he was ten. Leaving the Orphanage, he began to play professionally in Pennsylvania when he was sixteen. From the 1920s to the 1940s, he played with a number of groups including his own. He settled in Milwaukee in the 1940s. A talented trumpet player who also played the trombone, critics compared him to Louis Armstrong. However, his style was different. He was a talented and creative player who did things no one else did at the time. He paved the way for later trumpeters. As an old man in his seventies, he came out of retirement to have a comeback. He played the trumpet and sang in the Broadway play "One Mo' Time."

Woodrow Wilson "Buddy" Johnson was a band leader as well as a pianist and arranger in the years before World War II. Born in Darlington, he played in many New York clubs. His sister, Ella, sang with his band. A number of well-known singers got their first "break" with the band.

Etta Jones was an Aiken native who grew up in New York. She began singing with the Buddy Johnson Band when she was sixteen. She was discovered singing at an amateur hour one summer night in 1944. Ironically, she lost the contest when she sang in the wrong key. She toured with the band through the South and Midwest. After leaving Buddy Johnson's band, she began singing in clubs. Then she landed a recording contract. Over the years, she sang with various bands and performed around the country. Her successful 1959 record "Don't Go to Strangers" gave her a Grammy nomination. Around 1973, she met South Carolinian Houston Person when both were playing at a club in Washington. The two played and sang together for the next twenty years.

Houston Person grew up in Florence listening to all kinds of music on the radio. Although his mother played piano, his main interest was sports through most of high school. During his junior year, his father gave him a saxophone as a Christmas present. He began to play and joined a band. After hearing the S.C. State College band play during his senior prom, he decided his goal was to join this band. He played with the band all four years in college. While stationed in Germany with the Air Force, he played on the weekends at a jazz club with other servicemen. Later, he studied at the Hart School of Music in Hartford, Connecticut, under the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill was a federal government program that helped veterans pay for their education after they left the military. He met a number of the people who later became prominent in the jazz world including a fellow South Carolinian, Arthur Prysock. Person played with a band in Connecticut for awhile. Next he moved to Boston, and later to Newark. Over the years, he recorded and performed.

Arthur Prysock, who is best known as a singer of romantic songs, was born in Union, South Carolina. He grew up on a North Carolina farm. His goal was always to be a singer. He liked listening to music. At the age of sixteen, he left home. He went to Hartford, Connecticut where he found a job with an aircraft company. However, he was fired when his employers learned he was underage. His father had liked to cook and taught him cooking skills. So he decided to get a job as a cook to support himself. He

sang at night. In the beginning, he made \$3 a night, but the audiences liked him. In time, he was earning \$75 a week.

His big break came in 1945 when a singer with Buddy Johnson's blues orchestra became ill. Johnson gave him a chance to fill in. He paid him \$25. Prysock had never made so much money for one night's work. He remained with the orchestra until 1952, singing a number of hits, such as "They All Say I'm the Biggest Fool," "Jet, My Love," and "I Wonder Where Our Love Has Gone." After that he toured widely. He performed with a number of Big Bands and orchestras. He recorded his hit song "I Worry About You" three times. Eventually, he formed a group of his own that included his brother "Red," a saxophonist. In a career of more than forty years, he sang all over the country and recorded nearly sixty albums. Ironically, a commercial made Prysock known to people all over the country. In 1976, the Miller Beer Company asked him to make a commercial. He became associated with Lowenbrau beer. This led to additional work on radio and television. He settled on Long Island, New York, with his family where he cooked and played golf when he was not singing.

## **Gospel Music and Its Influence on Jazz and Blues**

Gospel music developed out of spirituals somewhere in the late 1800s or early 1900s. The songs were based on those originally sung in churches by enslaved African-Americans. Church members and ministers often improvised. In effect, they created new songs. Traditionally, African-Americans had engaged in foot stomping and hand clapping. Now they added musical instruments. The sound was much like that found in the blues and jazz.

In the early 1900s, gospel quartets became quite popular. The Golden Gate Quartet was the first group of its kind from South Carolina to sing and perform on radio and in the movies. The Spiritualaires received wide recognition. Many other groups performed locally and all over the state. Gospel groups were quite popular around the time of World War II.

Even before that, many jazz musicians and blues singers began their careers in gospel music. Among these are Don Covary, Josh White, and Drink

Small. The rhythm and blues singers James Brown and Nappy Brown, whom you will meet later in this chapter, also began in gospel.

Singer and songwriter Don Covary was born in Orangeburg in 1938. He grew up in Washington, D.C., singing first in a family gospel group. In the 1960s, he became a popular soul and blues singer.

Born in 1915 in Greenville, Josh White began his musical career at the age of seven by leading around a blind street singer. His father was a minister which exposed him to a lot of religious music early in life. He became internationally known as a singer of blues, folk songs, and religious music. He began recording music in 1931 in New York. Often referred to as the "Singing Christian," he could count Eleanor Roosevelt among his fans.

Drink Small is a modern musician who has lived and worked in Columbia, South Carolina. So Drink Small's name is more likely to be familiar to young people today than many of the other musicians in this book. This guitarist from Bishopville is known as the "Blues Doctor" to his fans. Even so, he plays all kinds of music and composes as well. He even recorded an album by that name.

Drink Small came from a musical family. His mother sang and his father played several instruments. As a child, he liked to listen to the blues on the radio. He wanted to learn to play the guitar, but had no money to buy one. So he made his own. He took a cigar box and stretched rubber bands around it. Later he said that it sounded more like a buzzing bee than a guitar. Apparently his family agreed. His uncle gave him a real guitar. That is how he began to play the guitar and to sing. Educated in Lee County, he sang in the glee club in high school. As a teenager, he played his guitar at parties on Friday and Saturday nights. He was part of a group called the Golden Five Quintet. On Sundays, he played the guitar and sang in church. In the 1950s, he joined a gospel group called the Spiritualaires, which toured in forty-one states. In 1957, he was voted the number one gospel guitarist by Metro Magazine. After the Spiritualaires broke up, he began to play the blues full-time. On Sundays, he performed gospel music.

Drink Small has continued his career as a musician into the 1990s. With his band, he plays at clubs, schools, and prisons. In 1993, Small performed at a

tribute to Dizzy Gillespie at the S.C. State Museum. He has produced several albums. The music goes on.

## **Rhythm and Blues**

Through much of the 1900s, even the music charts were segregated. Whites played pop, and blacks played rhythm and blues. Rhythm and blues is a form of music that became popular in the 1950s and influenced today's rock and roll. It grew out of many other forms of music: work songs, gospel, ragtime, and jazz. It is music that developed out of the experience of post-World War II African-Americans who had moved to the cities. Small bands played this loud, raucous music to which people loved to dance. In the early 1950s, white radio stations gradually began to play this new music. Its popularity led record company executives to come to the South looking for new talent. Ruth Brown, Fats Domino, the Drifters, and the Clovers were among the early successes. The Platters were the first rhythm and blues group to be signed by a major recording company.

By the mid-1950s, some elements of gospel music had been added to rhythm and blues. This led to what later became known as "soul." Soul music became popular in the 1960s. It was popularized by Ray Charles, James Brown, and a number of other singers. Soul has been described as music shaped by the need of African-Americans to find their own identity. A number of South Carolinians became known as rhythm and blues artists.

Blues singer Napoleon "Nappy" Brown was born in Charlotte, N.C. in 1929. He grew up in Pomaria, a small town near Columbia. Through his church, he became involved in music. A baritone singer, he performed with several gospel groups. He toured with a gospel group called the Heavenly Lights. Moving to Newark, New Jersey, a recording company "discovered" him in 1955 when he won first place singing the blues at a talent contest. He recorded over twenty-five singles in the 1950s and continued to record in the 1960s. Although considered a rhythm and blues singer, some of his songs were "crossovers" to pop, such as "Little by Little." A composer as well as a singer, his best known songs were "Night Time is the Right Time" (later popularized by Ray Charles), "Pitter Patter," and "Don't be Angry." This last song was a hit



on the rhythm and blues rating charts. His song "Night Time is the Right Time" is considered an important forerunner of the soul music of the 1960s. The 1959 album, "Thanks for Nothing," was an important soul music album.

Nappy Brown toured all over the U.S. and in Europe. Making a good living was difficult for African-American musicians of his day. They usually received little in royalties. After his marriage, Brown decided to leave the musical tour. He took a job as a maintenance man at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina. However, he did not give up his music. He continued singing gospel music and also sang in the AME Church. Eventually, he settled in Columbia. In the 1980s after a lengthy retirement, he decided to revive his career in Europe, where there was an interest in blues music. Once again, he began to record. In 1993 he played at a tribute to Dizzy Gillespie at the S.C. State Museum.

Certainly one of the best known "soul" and rhythm and blues singers of all times is James Brown. Raised in Georgia, he was born in 1928 in Tennessee to a poor family. He became serious about his music in his twenties. Like many other singers, he began in gospel. He formed a group called the Famous Flames in 1954. Moving over to secular music, his 1956 recording of "Please, Please, Please" led to a record contract. He became a leading rhythm and blues singer and toured all over the world. Although he has seen his share of personal and legal troubles, without a doubt he has been a very influential person in the world of music. An adopted South Carolinian, he makes his home today in Beech Island near Aiken.

Benjamin Franklin "Brook" Benton found himself pushing a cart around New York City to support himself at the age of seventeen. Born in Camden in 1931, he left the South like so many others to seek a better life. He first joined a gospel group, then formed a rhythm and blues group. Success began in 1959. He had twenty-one gold records in the next five years.

From the 1950s on, many African-American musicians became interested in modern-day African music. A number of African-American musicians even went to Africa to study the works of African composers. The rap music which developed in the 1970s emphasizes rhythm more than melody. This is a return to African tradition.

## The Charleston

People from all backgrounds have always loved to dance. African-Americans played a key role in creating two dances that are well-loved by Americans of all ethnic groups, the Charleston and the Shag. First we will look at the Charleston.

The dance which took America by storm during the 1920s seems to have originated in Charleston. The Charleston required contortions of the body that doubtless seemed strange to older people. Several versions explain how the Charleston began, but all of them associate it with African-American music and dancing. According to some, its roots are found in the "juba," African-American dancing performed during the time of enslavement.

One version of the origin of the Charleston associates it with the Jenkins Orphanage Band. According to the story, both blacks and whites danced to the music played by the band on Charleston's streets. Some say that even the musicians would put down their instruments and dance. The steps they invented later became the basis for the Charleston. A jazz pianist, Willie Smith, more or less confirmed this when he later wrote that the youngsters from the band had done a dance using "Geechie" steps on their trips to New York. Geechie probably takes its name from the speech of African-Americans living near the Ogeechee River, which is south of Savannah, Georgia. Perhaps this led to its popularity on the New York stage.

Doubtless, the roots of the Charleston were found in African-American dances. Some point to the dance steps in a 1921 musical entitled "Shuffle Along." The rhythm of the Charleston is also said to be the same as that of another African-American dance, the "Black Bottom." Regardless of its precise roots, the Charleston became the rage. It was first seen in a 1922 African-American musical comedy entitled "Liza." The dance turned up in another African-American musical named "Runnin' Wild," as well as two other shows in 1923.

James Johnson, along with Cecil Mack, wrote the song called "The Charleston" in 1923 when he was playing piano at the Jungles, a New York night club. He said that most of the patrons were Southerners, many from Charleston. The couples liked to dance to his music. He composed eight different

Charlestons, one of which was a later hit.

By the 1930s, the dance world had moved on to newer crazes. In the 1950s and 60s, however, the Charleston experienced a revival. People today still like to dance the Charleston.

## **The Shag: South Carolina's Official State Dance**

If you like to Shag, you might be surprised to learn that people have been doing various versions of this dance since the 1930s. No one is quite sure of the origins of South Carolina's state dance, but it probably developed out of the Charleston and the Jitterbug. It seems to have evolved from a popular dance called the Big Apple, which took the country by storm. The Big Apple took its name from a Columbia nightclub that was originally a synagogue. The club was popular with African-American dancers in the 1930s. Dancers improvised on these other dances, adding new steps. The dance became popular at the beach on the Grand Strand. Word spread. In the late 1930s, two groups of dancers from North and South Carolina were selected to go to New York and do this dance at a theater. It was a great success. Many people believe that this is how New York City got its nickname. In any case, the same basic steps used in the Jitterbug and the Big Apple are also found in the Shag.

The Shag is usually danced to a style of music known as "beach music." Beach music itself seems to have developed out of rhythm and blues. While in the 1930s, people were dancing to the sounds of the Big Bands, by the late 1940s people were dancing to beach music. The Shag became a beach dance. It lost some of its popularity in the 1960s, but experienced a revival in the 1970s. Singers such as General Johnson, the lead singer of Chairman of the Board, helped popularize the Shag and beach music with the song "Carolina Girl."

Maurice Williams is another very popular musician in the area of beach music. Williams, a native of Lancaster, grew up singing in the church choir and performing in his high school band. He started composing music when he was twelve. After he finished high school, he formed his own group. Williams and his group, the Zodiacs, won a Gold Record in 1960

for the song "Stay." He has appeared on many television shows.

Today, both the Shag and beach music live on. Shag clubs are popular in South Carolina, and colleges and recreational programs offer Shag classes.

## **Dance**

A number of African-Americans have made their mark in the world of dance. African-Americans in South Carolina organized several dance groups. One of these was the Yoruba Village Dancers in the Beaufort area which had many African features. Another was the Tillman Leagrae Theater Workshop. Joyce Idowa, a professional dancer, organized it in 1974 in Charleston. A number of individuals have also made significant contributions to dance all across the country. We will introduce you to two of these unique individuals.

One of the most unusual stories of someone overcoming adversity is that of Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates of Fountain Inn. As a boy in the early 1900s, he worked in a cotton mill to help support his family. He hurt his leg as a result of a terrible accident. A conveyer belt at the mill caught his leg. Little medical care was available for African-Americans. The leg had to be amputated.

Clayton had always enjoyed dancing. He was determined not to give it up. Even before he received a wooden peg leg made by his uncle, he was dancing by using two broomsticks to support himself. He continued to hone his skills. He began to dance at carnivals and fairs after moving to Greenville. He was a talented tap dancer. Eventually, he was "discovered." Before long he was dancing all over the country. He also danced on television and toured all over the world.

In later years, Peg Leg Bates decided to help other African-Americans. By this time, the early 1950s, he and his wife had settled in New York's Catskill Mountains. As a touring artist, he had often performed in places where he was not allowed to stay. So he turned his farm into a resort for African-Americans to enjoy.

Julius Fields became well-known for his work in the field of modern dance. Born in Hampton, he graduated from Allen University in 1953 and studied dance in New York. He appeared in the Broadway produc-

tion of *West Side Story*. Fields has a long list of credits in the theater and on television. He also appeared as a soloist with the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and performed in the New York Shakespeare Festival. Dancing apparently runs in the family. His older brother, James, was also a dancer and a dance teacher.

## Drama

Success in the field of drama has been more difficult for African-Americans than in the other areas we have already discussed. Many professional actors and actresses even today complain that few good roles exist for them. Prior to the mid-1900s, an African-American who was stagestruck had almost no chance of success.

Traveling minstrels performed from the late 1700s until after Reconstruction. This opportunity to perform was not much of a real chance. Minstrel-style entertainment started on plantations that had bands. In the early 1800s, white musicians imitated blacks on-stage. The imitations used unfair and unflattering stereotypes. When African-Americans began to perform, they were forced to carry on this "tradition." Having to earn a living by making fun of one's own ethnic group was a terrible thing. Sadly, that was what white audiences wanted to see.

However, in the years before the Civil War, some white writers did develop more realistic African-American characters. Plays such as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" showed enslavement for the great wrong that it was. But not until well into the 1900s were large-scale efforts made to show African-Americans as real people with hopes and dreams. Few roles existed for them.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, African-American churches and schools offered virtually the only chance for serious acting. In Charleston in the 1920s, opera directors offered African-Americans. Some minor roles. In the 1930s, a number of African-American elementary and high schools were able to use public auditoriums for performances. African-American colleges also offered theater programs. The Henderson-Davis Players at South Carolina State College began to perform in the 1940s. Sandra Bowie,



*African-Americans performed in a wide variety of ways. This Richard Roberts 1920s photo shows African-American magicians displaying some of the tools of their trade. Courtesy of Roberts family.*

Catherine Peppers Hill, and Samuel Wright were part of this troupe. The Henderson-Davis Players are still performing today.

A few individuals had success at the national level. Virginia Capers was an actress who gained fame by winning a Tony award for her role in *Raisin*. Eartha Kitt, the well known actress and singer, is probably one of South Carolina's most famous natives. Did you know that she once played the role of Catwoman in the television show *Batman*? Horace Ott, composer and arranger, did an all-black production of *Guys and Dolls*. Myrtle Hall Smith was a famous soprano and religious singer who has performed all over the world. You will meet some of these people elsewhere in this text.

Arthur Jackson was both a performer and a musician. Born in 1911 in Jonesville, he was always glad when it rained. Only on rainy days was he able to go to school. The rest of the time he had to work on

the farm along with his five brothers and sisters. Because his life was so hard, Jackson started running away from home at the age of ten. He traveled all across the country doing whatever work was available. Sometimes he got into trouble. As a result, he spent some time in reform school. An accident in 1930 changed his life. He fell off a train and lost his leg. This tragedy inspired him to concentrate on music. As a boy, he had played a harmonica.

After the accident, Jackson began to play in some of the medicine shows that were popular across the South. These shows usually appeared at places where people gathered, like the county fairs. The shows were popular through the 1950s. The job of the musicians was to attract a crowd. The "doctor" needed a crowd to make his sales pitch. As a performer, Jackson played the harmonica, told jokes and stories, and was a straight man for the jokes of other performers. He took on the role of "Peg Leg Sam" in the medicine shows. For a number of years, he traveled with Leo Kahdot, a native American who went by the name Chief Thundercloud. The performances usually lasted about two hours. They sold different products after each of the three shows. If you had been there, you might have had the opportunity to buy "corn medicine" or some equally interesting and probably useless item. Jackson always performed some kind of dance. A favorite was his imitation of a chicken that had just been killed for dinner. Doubtless the audience loved it! Although Jackson continued to perform until 1973, he was virtually the last of the breed.

Jackson had seen "Pink" Anderson, a talented guitarist from Spartanburg perform in the 1920s. By watching him, Jackson learned what to do. Anderson became a close friend. One of Pink Anderson's many songs was entitled "Every Day of the Week."

"I hate to leave you Mama God knows I sure hate to go

I hate to leave you Mama God knows I sure hate to go

Had the blues so long it made my poor heart so'

The blues jumped the devil run the devil a solid mile

The blues jumped the devil run the devil a solid mile

Well the devil set down and he cried like a new-born Chile"

[From Charles Joyner, *Folk Songs in South Carolina*. Columbia: USC Press, 1971, p.101. Courtesy USC Press.]

A different type of entertainment replaced the medicine show and other live performances. Americans have loved to go to the movies since the creation of this form of entertainment in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Producers made little effort to cater to the African-American audience. Nina Mae McKinney, a native of Lancaster, born in 1913, experienced the frustrations common to other African-Americans of her generation despite her beauty and talent. Generally, considered the first

*Beryl Dakers, a producer for S.C. Educational Television, has used her own creative skills to teach about the artistic contributions of other South Carolinians. One of her television documentaries looks at the Jenkins Orphanage Band and its influence on jazz. Courtesy of SCETV.*





African-American female movie star, she moved to New York with her family. She was on Broadway when she was seventeen. Following this, she appeared in the movie *Hallelujah* as the seductive "Chick." This led to a five-year contract with a major movie studio, but there was little work available for her. She joined the exodus of talented African-Americans who went to Europe, where she became a nightclub singer and worked in motion pictures. Her last important film role was in the 1947 movie *Pinky*. McKinney is said to have been the model of the innocent, beautiful young woman used by many actresses of the next generation. She died in 1967.

Few television roles were available for African-American actors until the 1960s, and indeed they remain limited even today. James Franklin Fields was one of the few South Carolina natives who made a name for himself in television and movies. In time, others will follow.

In 1993, we can see the beginning of change in the entertainment industry. Kimberly Aiken of Columbia was the first African-American Miss South Carolina to win the Miss America title. Beautiful and talented people of all ethnic backgrounds can now win national fame.

While few African-American actors have yet found suitable national roles, local groups continue to flourish. One interesting effort to preserve and popu-

larize African-American history is called Company I. This Charleston group is portraying the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry which fought in South Carolina during the Civil War. The 1989 movie entitled *Glory* recounted their story. While many other reenactor groups exist around the nation, Company I is the first African-American group of this kind in South Carolina.

### **African-American Cultural Heritage as Part of Americana**

South Carolina's African-Americans have played a significant role in the development of our nation's cultural heritage. Through music, dance, and theater, they have added to the variety from which we can all choose. Popular commercial music was a field that was once closed to African-Americans. While excluded from the mainstream, they created their own forms of music: What would be considered more American today than jazz? Musical experts often say that jazz is the single most important American contribution to the world of music. It is an African-American contribution. Similarly, people everywhere adopted African-American dance steps. African-American music and dance have become part of a wider American heritage. South Carolina, the nation, and the world are all richer for these contributions.

